

*A publication of the VA Stars & Stripes Healthcare Network*

# Veterans First

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## A MESSAGE FROM THE DIRECTOR

“  
... by nurturing and supporting research, we are able to attract some of the best clinicians to our Network, many of whom are also affiliated with the best universities in the nation.”

### ON THE COVER

#### (main photo)

Veteran William Farr (right), with Chaplain Mike Wurschmidt, speaking with a veteran

PHOTO COURTESY OF  
VA PITTSBURGH HEALTHCARE SYSTEM

#### (upper inset)

Logo for VA “Time is Life for Heart Attack” cardiac education program

#### (lower inset)

Vital Veteran Robert Toporek during his service in Vietnam

PHOTO COURTESY OF ROBERT TOPOREK

*Veterans First* is a health care publication of the VA Stars & Stripes Healthcare Network. The publication is intended to provide information to help you stay well, manage your health care, and learn about health services available through VA. It is not intended as a substitute for professional medical advice, which should be obtained from your doctor.

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Dear Veterans,

One of the primary ways we seek to improve care to veterans is by supporting medical research at our facilities.

Around the Network, research investigators are currently involved with the study of a vast array of diseases and conditions, prevention and treatment options, and possible cures. Much of this research is devoted to health care concerns that affect large numbers of veterans, such as Gulf War ailments, Hepatitis C, HIV infection, substance abuse, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), diabetes, and PTSD.

Leading the charge in these efforts are our specialized research centers, which focus on conditions like Parkinson’s disease, sleep disorders, mental illness, geriatric diseases (such as stroke), and mobility problems. The Parkinson’s Disease Research, Education and Clinical Center, for instance, is currently doing studies on deep-brain stimulation. Tiny electrodes are implanted into the patient’s brain that allow the patient to control activity in the part of the brain affected by Parkinson’s disease. These studies and others like them may eventually lead to a cure for this debilitating disease.

The pursuit of research benefits our patients in more immediate ways, of course. For example, by nurturing and supporting research, we are able to attract some of the best clinicians to our Network, many of whom are also affiliated with the best universities in the nation. In addition, several of our specialized research centers combine clinical research with provider education and direct patient care. This significantly increases our ability to provide veterans with the best care available. It is only through research, education, and the use of new approaches to patient care, that we can truly provide the best possible service to those who have served our nation.

Charleen R. Szabo, FACHE  
Network Director



*Ms. Szabo visits with Mr. Willis Sharp on the new transitional nursing home care unit at the Louis A. Johnson VA Medical Center in Clarksburg, West Virginia.*

PHOTO COURTESY OF LOUIS A. JOHNSON VA MEDICAL CENTER



## COMPASSIONATE LISTENING AT THE HEART OF THE VA CHAPLAINCY SERVICE

The ability to listen has been the hallmark of VA's chaplaincy service. The service began in 1945, when VA Administrator General Omar Bradley ordered the placement of full-time and part-time chaplains in all VA hospitals. Their mission was—and is—to “nurture the living, care for the sick or wounded, minister to prisoners or prisoners of war, and honor the dead.” Today there are approximately 650 full, part-time, or “as-needed” chaplains in the VA system, encompassing all major faiths.

VA chaplains help patients and their families deal with issues involving faith, stress, anxiety, redeployment, or reunion, in addition to performing worship services. “But my primary job is to listen,” says Rev. Eugene Reddel, chief of chaplain service for the VA Pittsburgh Healthcare System (VAPHS) and a chaplain for over 30 years. “If I listen well, the patients will tell me what they need.”

The ultimate goal of listening, according to Reddel, is to help the veteran discover “meaning” in his (or her) life. “If there is no meaning, there is no life and no recovery.

A patient's care and healing is undergirded by the meaning he finds in his life—his spirituality.” Listening also lets patients and their families know that they matter... that someone cares enough to hear their concerns.

The chaplaincy is moving more and more into palliative care - treatment that enhances comfort and improves the quality of an individual's life during the last phase of life. “Patients don't like to be alone in their last days, so more chaplains are needed to make certain someone is there with them,” remarks Reddel. “We let them know that they may be beyond cure, but they are not beyond care.” So VAPHS is currently using clergy, seminarians, and resident chaplain-interns in its clinical pastoral education program to spend time with terminally ill patients.

Chaplain Reddel, who was the 2003 recipient of VA's “Secretary's Award for Excellence in Chaplaincy,” feels that a chaplain's best asset is his own humanity and caring. “By the very nature of his job, the chaplain takes a more holistic view of the patient's care. His compassionate presence can help that patient find meaning in the midst of suffering and pain. And it can help other health care professionals recognize the value of spiritual bonds in patient care.”

VA Stars & Stripes Healthcare Network recognizes the important role that the chaplaincy can play in promoting a veteran's physical, emotional, and/or spiritual health. As a result, the chaplain is a vital member of the patient care team at each of our VA medical centers.



PHOTO COURTESY OF VA PITTSBURGH HEALTHCARE SYSTEM

*L to R: Veteran Dave Shanon, speaking with William Farr and Chaplain Mike Wurschmidt (“Pastor Mike”) at the VA Pittsburgh Healthcare System*

### One Veteran's Experience

*Fifty-six-year-old Marine veteran Bill Farr walked into the Highland Drive Division of the VA Pittsburgh Healthcare System and emerged a new man. “I have been blessed with a new life, but I had to learn how to live again!”*

*That new life began when Farr, who served in Vietnam from 1968-69, decided to turn to the VA system to help him straighten out his life. “I was all messed up,” said Farr. “I had spent the last 24 years angry at everyone!”*

*One of the first people he encountered at VA was Chaplain Eugene Reddel. “He was teaching a class about spirituality,” says Farr. Chaplain Reddel took the time to help Farr, and now Farr helps others.*

*Through a ministry called Shepherd's Heart, Farr helps those that may be “down and out” get off the streets. “Now I work with Pastor Mike, a part-time VA chaplain,” explains Farr. “We are there for people who need us every day. Sometimes we just sit and talk or pray with them and give them a hot meal,” he explains.*

*When Farr sees angry and despairing veterans come to his ministry, he remembers his own journey and the help he received from Chaplain Reddel.*

*“These are just people that fell out of grace, just as I did. And there isn't anyone that can't be restored. God just has to do a little work on you. All you have to do is ask for help.”*

# HEALING THE UNSEEN WOUNDS

Wounds of the mind and heart can be as serious as physical wounds and illnesses but often remain unseen. Services offered at local VA medical centers (VAMCs) help treat the unseen disorders, such as military-related psychological or sexual trauma. One such condition is post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

According to VA's My Health<sub>Vet</sub> Web site ([www.myhealth.va.gov](http://www.myhealth.va.gov)), "PTSD is an anxiety disorder that can develop after exposure to a terrifying or scary event or experience—sometimes weeks or months after the event." Symptoms may include one or more of the following: flashback episodes, nightmares, inability to sleep, being easily irritated, having angry outbursts, and feelings of loneliness.

According to the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH), about 30 percent of the men and women who have spent time in war zones experience PTSD. But PTSD is not limited to those who have served in war zones. NIMH estimates that about 3.6 percent of U.S. adults ages 18 to 54 have PTSD during the course of a given year following exposure to a traumatic event.

Today, when veterans first present for care, VA medical centers routinely screen every one of them (including those of past wars) for PTSD and military-related sexual trauma. "Assessing war-related or military sexual trauma is now part of our initial primary care screening process," says Dr. Steven Silver, a Vietnam combat veteran and director of the PTSD program at the Coatesville VAMC. Veterans who need help with such conditions can then obtain assistance through their local VAMC.

In addition to receiving care for these conditions at VA medical centers, veterans may obtain treatment for PTSD and military-related sexual trauma at specific VA Stars & Stripes Healthcare Network community-based outpatient clinics (CBOCs). "At the Coatesville VAMC, we have outpatient clinics all the way from Lancaster, PA, to Ventnor, NJ," says Silver. "Help is available through our clinical teams there."

VA health care facilities also work closely with others within and outside of the organization to help veterans deal with these conditions. Since 1979, for example, the VA's Readjustment Counseling Service—through its storefront *Vet Centers*—has provided counseling for war-related psychological or sexual trauma to veterans (and their family members)

who have served in any war or in any area during a period of armed hostilities. There are currently 12 Vet Centers located within the Network's service area and many others throughout the nation. Nearby Vet Centers are listed on our Web site: [www.starsandstripes.med.va.gov](http://www.starsandstripes.med.va.gov)

Increased coordination between VA and the Department of Defense (DoD) is also assisting today's veterans in their readjustment to civilian life. For example, VA social workers at the Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington, DC and the Bethesda Naval Medical Center in Maryland are helping returning veterans arrange for care at their local VAMC before they ever leave the hospital. "The VA today probably has the most wide-ranging array of services for returning veterans than at any time in its history," says Silver. "This makes the transition much easier for the veterans and their families."

Cooperation between VA and DoD has also led to a joint study of war reactions and their treatment. "The result is," says Silver, "we now know that this isn't something you 'just have to live with.' There is hope, because that trauma can be treated effectively."

For more information about treatment for any military-related psychological or sexual trauma, check with your VA primary care provider.



*Dr. Steven Silver (right) and Jim Goss, RN, unit manager of the PTSD program (left) at Coatesville VA Medical Center, discussing treatment options for veterans.*

PHOTO COURTESY OF COATESVILLE VA MEDICAL CENTER

# DO YOU HAVE A PLAN TO LIVE?



Do you have a survival plan in case you have the early warning signs of a heart attack? “Time is Life for Heart Attack” is a VA cardiac education program that stresses the importance of having a personal survival plan and seeking immediate medical treatment when symptoms first occur. This survival plan can mean the difference between life and death.

The first step in your plan should be to make sure you know the heart attack warning signs shown below. Next, talk to your VA provider about steps you can take to reduce your risk of a heart attack. Finally, complete the survival plan found on page 8 of this issue, and share your plan with family and friends.

## What should you do if you experience the early warning signs of a heart attack?

1. Call 911 immediately. Do NOT delay. Heart attack victims do best when they seek treatment within the first hour of the first symptom.
2. Take one regular aspirin *after* you call 911 (unless you are allergic to aspirin).
3. Wait for an ambulance. (Do NOT drive.) Tell the ambulance attendants you have chest pain.
4. The ambulance will take you to the *nearest* health care facility that can treat heart attack victims. (This may not be a VA facility.)

For more information about Time is Life for Heart Attack, check with your VA primary care provider or visit the Web site [www.va.gov/cardiology](http://www.va.gov/cardiology)

## Heart Attack Warning Signs

- ✓ Uncomfortable pressure, fullness, squeezing, or pain anywhere in the chest lasting more than a few minutes
- ✓ Pain spreading to the shoulder, neck, in one or both arms, stomach, or back
- ✓ Chest discomfort with lightheadedness, fainting, sweating, nausea, vomiting, or shortness of breath
- ✓ Chest discomfort with a feeling of doom or imminent death

*Besides symptoms common to men, women may have other symptoms such as:*

- ✓ Shortness of breath without chest pain
- ✓ Pain in the lower part of the chest
- ✓ Fatigue



## LOW CARBS AND LOW-CARB DIETS: HELPFUL GUIDANCE



Dietitian Susan Leslie

Low-carbohydrate (or “low-carb”) diets have become a very popular approach to losing weight. Not surprisingly, more veterans are asking questions about “low-carb” diets in their own battle against obesity.

So what are carbohydrates and what do we need to keep in mind if considering a low-carb diet? According to Susan Leslie, registered dietitian at the Butler VA Medical Center, carbohydrates are the body’s main source of fuel and energy.

“There are two types of carbohydrates,” says Leslie. “‘Simple carbs,’ found in table sugar, candy, and soda, are quickly digested and used by the body.” However, the resulting rise in blood sugar causes the body to produce large amounts of insulin, a hormone that regulates blood sugar. This in turn causes a rapid drop in blood sugar, called a “sugar crash.” This drop can lead to

symptoms of weakness, hunger, and headaches.

On the other hand, many “complex carbs”—like those found in whole grain breads and cereals, brown rice, and wheat pasta—are slower to digest, thereby placing less demand on the body for insulin. Because of this, Leslie believes that no matter what diet a person chooses, complex carbs rather than simple carbs are healthier choices because they are naturally low in fat, high in fiber, and provide vitamins and minerals.

If you are considering a low-carb diet (or any other diet), Leslie recommends that you *talk to your VA primary care provider first*.

### Tips for Veterans Considering or On a Low-Carb Diet

1. Choose complex carbs rather than simple carbs.
2. Eat lean proteins such as chicken, fish, and lean cuts of red meat.
3. Eat whole grains, fruits, and vegetables to increase fiber intake.
4. Begin an exercise program (such as walking).
5. Drink plenty of water.



## MAKING A DIFFERENCE: CREATING THE OPPORTUNITY TO SUCCEED

In 1965, Milton Olive threw himself on a grenade in Vietnam to save some of his buddies in the 173<sup>rd</sup> Airborne Brigade. That sacrifice had a profound effect on his tent mate, Robert Toporek. "When Miltie died," says Toporek, "I made a vow that I would make a difference in this world."

And that he has done – by providing computers to those in need. Toporek got the idea while working with kids in a lower-income Philadelphia neighborhood. As he got to know these children, he realized many had no fathers, books, or computers—nothing to help give them hope. So he began finding used computers and giving them to families in the neighborhood.

After the death of his ex-wife, Toporek found himself a single father and flat broke. "I had to reassess where I was going in my life. Her illness had taken all my savings. I still had a hundred computers and I needed to figure out what to do with them," said Toporek. "Well, someone said that the best way to solve a problem is to get a bigger problem. So I asked myself what it would take to help 2,000 families get a computer. What would I have to do? What would I have to give up?"

The first thing he needed was space. After the first 39 realtors turned him down, he found one who let him use a warehouse in Norristown, Pa., rent-free for a year. From this beginning, Team Children was born. Team Children, a non-profit agency, is

# Vital VETERAN



*Robert Toporek's new goal:  
a computer for every child.*

staffed by volunteers, half of whom are adults (many of them veterans and seniors) and the other half, teenagers.

After he reached his initial goal of providing computers to 2,000 families, Toporek was ready to quit and spend

more time with his son. But his son wouldn't have it! "Dad, you can't quit," he said. "I can sacrifice a little of your time so more families can be helped!"

Through Team Children, Toporek has now provided over 5,000 computers. Over 90 percent have gone to single women at or below poverty level or children with developmental disabilities. In fact, the first woman who received a computer will soon graduate high school. Toporek is proud of the fact that his mission is also beginning to change the lives of other members of her family— he just went back to train them on using computers, too.

Having seen what his program can do in one neighborhood, Toporek dreams of bringing his vision of a computer in every home to entire towns or even states. "What we are doing is just a step in the road to transforming how we as a culture raise our children," says Toporek, "so that every child has an opportunity to succeed." ★

*Do you know a veteran who, after returning from the service, has continued to make an important contribution to the lives of others, his or her community, or our country (e.g., in the fields of science, medicine, the arts, etc.)? If so, please write and tell us about this Vital Veteran. Please include a paragraph telling why you are nominating this veteran. Include specific instances of what he or she is doing*

*to better the lives of others. Be sure to include your address and telephone number in case we need to reach you.*

*Mail to:*

**"Vital Veteran"  
VA Stars & Stripes  
Healthcare Network  
Delafield Road  
Pittsburgh, PA 15240**

## Veterans Update

# NEWS YOU CAN USE

### Secretary Principi Decides on National CARES Plan

Secretary Principi recently announced his decision on what will be in VA's Capital Asset Realignment for Enhanced Services (CARES) Plan. CARES is a major initiative to help assure VA meets the anticipated needs of veterans projected to use our health care system over the next 10-20 years.

Highlights include adding a new outpatient spinal cord injury center at the Philadelphia VA Medical Center (VAMC) and realigning inpatient services at VA Pittsburgh Healthcare System's Highland Drive Division to the nearby University Drive and Heinz Divisions. New additions and other facilities will be built on those two campuses. Once these are completed, the Highland Drive Division would be closed.

Additionally, all inpatient beds will remain open at the Altoona and Erie VAMCs for the foreseeable future. Inpatient beds at the Butler VAMC will remain open until that facility has made alternative arrangements to provide for the hospital-care

needs of Butler-area veterans.

The Secretary's decision can be viewed in its entirety at [www.va.gov/cares](http://www.va.gov/cares)

### New Web Site on Hepatitis C

A new, comprehensive Web site on Hepatitis C — [www.hepatitis.va.gov](http://www.hepatitis.va.gov) — has been launched through collaboration between the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) and the University of California at San Francisco's Center for HIV Information. The Web site will help both veterans and medical practitioners understand this complex, long-term illness.

Hepatitis C is the most common blood-borne infection in the United States, affecting 2 percent of the population. VA cares for more Hepatitis C patients than any other medical system: more than 200,000 patients since 1996. The department has the largest screening, testing, and care program for Hepatitis C in the nation.

### Some Survivors of Veterans Face Deadline for Restored Benefit

VA wants to ensure that surviving spouses of deceased veterans are aware of an approaching deadline that may affect entitlement to Dependency and Indemnity Compensation (DIC) benefits.

Department officials are concerned that surviving spouses may not be aware of this change in law, or may overlook this benefit if their subsequent marriages have not ended.

Under previous law, surviving spouses who remarried were not eligible for DIC unless their marriages ended. At that time they could apply for reinstatement of benefits. The "Veterans Benefits Act of 2003," restores entitlement to DIC and related home loan and education benefits for surviving spouses who remarry on or after their 57<sup>th</sup> birthdays. Those who remarried after age 57 and before December 16<sup>th</sup>, 2003, have one year to apply for restoration of benefits. If VA receives the application later than Dec. 15, 2004, restoration of DIC must be denied. The one-year application period does not apply to other surviving spouses whose remarriage on or after attaining age 57 followed enactment of the law. For more information, call 1-800-827-1000.

*For more details on these and other VA health care developments, please visit our Web site or call your nearest VA medical center. (See back cover for telephone numbers.)*

## SERVING YOU

### VA Stars & Stripes Healthcare Network

Here's one good reason to get to know the facilities that make up the VA Stars & Stripes Healthcare Network: **You are our top priority!** Dedicated to serving veterans living in Pennsylvania, Delaware, and areas of West Virginia, Ohio, New Jersey, and New York, the Network offers comprehensive services ranging from preventive screenings and checkups to long-term care. At our 10 medical centers and nearly 40 freestanding outpatient clinics, teams of skilled health care professionals - including specialists in substance abuse, prosthetics and post-traumatic stress disorder - are committed to your health and well being.

## VOLUNTEERS NEEDED

**Please contact your nearest VA medical center or visit our**

**Web site for**

**more**

**information.**



## HEART ATTACK SURVIVAL PLAN

### Information for ambulance and hospital staff

My medicines and specific instructions from my provider:

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Medicines I'm allergic to: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

VA provider name and phone number during office hours:

\_\_\_\_\_

VA medical center phone number after office hours:

Person to contact if I go to the hospital:

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Home Phone: \_\_\_\_\_

Work Phone: \_\_\_\_\_

Cell Phone: \_\_\_\_\_



Complete this card and keep it handy. It can help save your life or the life of someone you care about.

## VA Stars & Stripes Healthcare Network Medical Centers

### ALTOONA - PA

James E. Van Zandt VA Medical Center  
2907 Pleasant Valley Blvd • Altoona, PA 16602-4377  
(814) 943-8164 or 1-877-626-2500 (toll free)

### BUTLER - PA

VA Medical Center  
325 New Castle Road • Butler, PA 16001  
(724) 287-4781 or 1-800-362-8262

### CLARKSBURG - WV

Louis A. Johnson VA Medical Center  
One Medical Center Drive • Clarksburg, WV 26301  
(304) 623-3461 or 1-800-733-0512

### COATESVILLE - PA

VA Medical Center  
1400 Black Horse Hill Rd • Coatesville, PA 19320-2096  
(610) 384-7711 or 1-800-290-6172

### ERIE - PA

VA Medical Center  
135 East 38 Street • Erie, PA 16504  
(814) 868-8661 or 1-800-274-8387

### LEBANON - PA

VA Medical Center  
1700 South Lincoln Ave. • Lebanon, PA 17042  
(717) 272-6621 or 1-800-409-8771

### PHILADELPHIA - PA

VA Medical Center  
University and Woodland Avenues  
Philadelphia, PA 19104  
(215) 823-5800 or 1-800-949-1001



### PITTSBURGH - PA

VA Pittsburgh Healthcare System  
1-866-4VAPITT or 1-866-482-7488

University Drive Division  
University Drive • Pittsburgh, PA 15240  
Highland Drive Division  
7180 Highland Drive • Pittsburgh, PA 15206  
H. John Heinz, III Progressive Care Center  
Delafield Road • Pittsburgh, PA 15240

### WILKES-BARRE - PA

VA Medical Center  
1111 East End Boulevard • Wilkes-Barre, PA 18711  
(570) 824-3521 or 1-877-928-2621 (toll free)

### WILMINGTON - DE

VA Medical Center  
1601 Kirkwood Highway • Wilmington, DE 19805  
(302) 994-2511 or 1-800-461-8262

### THE LATEST INFORMATION FOR VETERANS ON OUR WEB SITE

Any time you need it, you can find accurate and timely news and information for veterans by visiting the VA Stars & Stripes Healthcare Network Web site.

#### Recent updates to the site include:

- a "Key Indicators" report, which provides information on our Network's performance in various

areas including the number of veterans treated and patient satisfaction

- a link to the VA Readjustment Counseling Service Web site including information on the Vet Centers' bereavement counseling-- a service now being offered to parents, spouses, and children of Armed Forces personnel who died in the service of their country (Note: Family members of reservists and National Guardsmen who die while on duty are also eligible.)

- a link to the 2004 edition, Federal Benefits for Veterans and Dependents.

If you don't have access to the Internet at home or at the home of family or friends, check with your local library. Many libraries offer Internet access free-of-charge to the public.

[www.starsandstripes.med.va.gov](http://www.starsandstripes.med.va.gov)

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